DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 363 213 HE 026 823

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TITLE General Education Curriculum: Renewal and Assessment.
PUB DATE 92
NOTE 7p.
PUB TYPE Reports - General (140)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS College Curriculum; Communication Skills; Critical Thinking; Cultural Awareness; Cultural Interrelationships; *Curriculum Development; *General Education; Higher Education; Liberal Arts; Program Administration; Relevance (Education); State Universities; *Student Development; *Student Educational Objectives; Undergraduate Study
IDENTIFIERS *Southeast Missouri State University

ABSTRACT

This report describes significant phases in the development of Southeast Missouri State University's "University Studies" program instituted in 1988 as part of a general movement among American institutions of higher education to review and redesign their general education curricula. The report highlights unique program characteristics, articulates ways in which University Studies interfaces with other campus programs, and describes the integrated nature of the assessment component. The University Studies program is currently in the fourth year of implementation and consists of slightly over 100 courses, all designed to provide students with opportunities to develop expertise in nine program objectives. Additionally, activities addressing program objectives have been developed in selected areas of the Division of Student Affairs. The program requires that students demonstrate: (1) the ability to locate and gather information; (2) capabilities for critical thinking, reasoning, and analyzing; (3) effective communication skills; (4) an understanding of human experiences and the ability to relate them to the present; (5) an understanding of various cultures and their interrelationships; (6) the ability to integrate the breadth and diversity of knowledge and experience; (7) the ability to make informed, intelligent value decisions; (8) the ability to make informed, sensitive aesthetic responses; and (9) the ability to function responsibly in one's natural, social, and political environment. The report stresses that feedback provided by the use of multiple assessment measures of student achievement within the program is essential to making improvements and to keeping the program dynamic. (GLR)

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GENERAL EDUCATION CURRICULUM: RENEWAL AND ASSESSMENT

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Higher education in the decade of the eighties was characterized by numerous attempts to redesign general education programs. Spear (1990) noted that as many as 95% of American colleges and universities were "revisiting the issue of general and liberal education (p. 1)," and a survey published by the American Council on Education in February, 1986, indicated that 80% of American institutions of higher education were reviewing their general education curricula (cited in Chandler, 1987).

A part of this curricular movement, Southeast Missouri State University implemented a totally new general education program in the Fall of 1988. Entitled University Studies, the new program was the result of seven years of preparation and resulted in the creation of over one hundred new or totally redesigned courses. This paper describes significant phases in this revision process, highlights unique program characteristics, articulates ways in which the University Studies Program interfaces with other campus programs, and describes the integrated nature of the assessment component.

Institution Overview

Southeast Missouri State University is a regional comprehensive institution with approximately 400 full-time faculty located in five academic colleges. Enrollment is approximately 8,500 students. The University was established in 1875 and is the only senior institution of higher education in southeast Missouri. The institution has expanded from its "Normal School" roots to a comprehensive status with over one hundred different majors. The University serves a land mass larger than nine states with a population of nearly 3/4 million.

Rationale for General Education Revision

During the past thirty years Southeast Missouri State has experienced many significant changes. Examples include a large number of new programs which resulted in an increase in the number of academic departments from 21 to 35. Student enrollments more than doubled and the number of full-time faculty increased from 180 to slightly over 400. However, the University's general education program did not change during this time resulting in a program that was essentially identical to the program developed in 1963. General education was perceived by faculty as the means for providing students with introductory subject matter to support selected majors, and by students as the "stuff to be gotten out of the way." This is not to imply that courses in the program were of poor

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quality or poorly taught since there is evidence to the contrary. However, the courses were unrelated, restricted to the lower level, and "belonged" to selected departments.

Successful General Education Revision Strategies

1. Education of the Revision Task Force

After a failed attempt at revision in the seventies, a revision task force was formed in 1980. Representative members were elected from each of the academic colleges and the library for three year terms. The Provost was also a member of the task force. Recognizing the need to become familiar with a rapidly growing body of revision literature, the task force engaged in a two-year self education process consisting of an extensive survey of existing literature, attendance at appropriate national conferences and workshops on general education, and lengthy discussions leading to consensus about the nature and role of liberal education programs in the academy. This period of self-education served to build community on the part of task force members. The Provost provided approximately $15,000 to support and stimulate this effort. Essentially, during these years the members worked to build a knowledge base for the future. Little was written or formulated. As a result, the committee started to function as a team and began to think in terms of the institutional mission and the future quality of life of students rather than of the academic programs in the departments and colleges they represented.

2. Securing Approval in Stages

A. Program Objectives

The first overt task force activity was the development of possible program objectives in the Spring of 1983. These student performance objectives were shared with all parts of the university community through a series of survey instruments and interviews. After several revisions the following nine objectives were approved in 1984 by the Faculty Senate, the Academic Council, the Provost, the President, and the Board of Regents:

* Demonstrate the ability to locate and gather information.
* Demonstrate capabilities for critical thinking, reasoning and analyzing.
* Demonstrate effective communication skills.
* Demonstrate an understanding of human experiences and the ability to relate them to the present.
* Demonstrate an understanding of various cultures and their interrelationships.
* Demonstrate the ability to integrate the breadth and diversity of knowledge and experience.
* Demonstrate the ability to make informed, intelligent value decisions.
* Demonstrate the ability to make informed, sensitive aesthetic responses.
* Demonstrate the ability to function responsibly in one's natural, social and political environment.

Securing approval for these program objectives from all components of the university community served to focus discussion and dialogue on institutional goals and the future needs of students, thereby creating a positive atmosphere for change.

B. Course Approval Procedures

Following approval of program objectives strong support existed for the task force to propose a program structure. Faculty held strong views as to why their respective departments should be included in the revised program and why other departments should not be included. A third successful revision strategy involved focusing faculty attention on course approval procedures rather than program structure at this critical period. This strategy served to focus attention on ways the program objectives were to be used in course development and, perhaps more importantly, enabled the task force to establish the principle that all courses in the program would either be new or completely rewritten. Subsequently a "Procedures Statement" was approved that required all courses to meet as many program objectives as possible and as significantly as possible. The result was that the faculty began to think in terms of incorporating objectives into courses rather than where their discipline would be located in the structure of the new program. This provision ensured that the program would indeed be a true program rather than a collection of courses since the treatment of all program objectives was pervasive.

C. Program Structure

Having established course approval procedures, the task force was now in a position to design a structure for the new program. After considerable discussion it was determined that certain features were essential. For example, a freshman seminar was perceived to be necessary in order to introduce beginning students to the role of liberal education in the undergraduate curriculum, to the program itself, and to the academic resources available for their use. It was also determined that an upper-level component was essential in order to promote the concept that a liberal education program is as important as the major rather than something "to get out of the way." It was also determined that the upper-level component would consist of three interdisciplinary courses, two at the junior level and a senior seminar containing a research component. The freshman and senior seminars were important components in the design of program assessment activities.

The task force was determined to design a program in which courses could be added or removed with minimum impact on departmental staffing. The result was a lower-level core curriculum consisting of three perspectives, each containing four categories of courses. Students would take one course from each category.

This particular configuration enabled the institution to add courses to the program as new information becomes available or is deemed important, and to remove courses from the program when appropriate, without jeopardizing departments or the program itself. Further, since perspectives and categories do not "belong" to any particular college or department (any department could propose a course for any category), this structure promotes the view that general education ownership is institutional rather than in the hands of selected departments.

3. Course Development

Following approval of the structure of the new program in 1986 the serious business of course development began. Since designing a sufficient number of new courses for an entirely new program was a unique one-time activity, funding in the form of course development stipends was made available to faculty engaged in writing new courses. The revision task force served as the initial course approval body and developed criteria for the treatment of program objectives in proposed syllabi. Workshops were presented by experts from Southeast and other institutions in order to facilitate course development activities. A year of activity resulted in the approval of 64 courses which were ready for implementation of the program in the fall semester of 1988.

Administrative Structure

Preceding implementation, a program administration was formed, consisting of a dean, a coordinator of the freshman year course and a director of the interdisciplinary curriculum. The dean was to function as a program advocate as opposed to having arts and sciences deans responsible for general education. Offices and a budget were established, a school was formed using the graduate school model, and a representative council elected. Funding for the formation of the school was provided by an increase in the institutional base. Having the one-year period for these activities was critical to a successful implementation of the program.

Relationships between University Studies and other Institutional Programs

If the University Studies Program at Southeast is to provide students with expertise in the skills they will need to become more fully human and to become responsible citizens of the next century it is important that the program philosophy become as pervasive as possible throughout the institution. Accordingly, program objectives have been incorporated into various areas in the Division of Student Affairs, particularly in selected residence life, student life, and student activities programs (see Zeller, Hinni, and Eison, 1989; Hinni and Eison, 1990).

In addition, the School of University Studies includes the Governor's Scholars Program, the Honors Program, the Writing Outcomes Program and the University Museum. All of these programs provide activities that support the University Studies program.

Assessment

At the same time the program was being developed, the institution was developing an assessment plan. The focus on assessment was a part of the reason for the emphasis placed on objectives rather than on program structures. Faculty attitudes toward assessment have passed through several phases, including resistance, grudging compliance, into active participation.

The assessment plan called for the use of the ACT COMP examination as a part of the assessment of the program. After several years' experience, ACT COMP has been replaced with the short form of the Academic Profile examination. Academic Profile better fits the objectives and the structure of the program. Academic Profile is administered in sections of the freshman seminar course each fall semester and in the senior seminar in the spring semester. By administering the examinations in a classroom setting student effort is increased. Also, a more representative sample of students is tested. Results allow comparisons between freshmen at Southeast and freshmen at comparable institutions and between seniors at Southeast and seniors at comparable institutions.

The assessment plan also called for institutionally developed instruments that would focus on the program's nine objectives. A follow-up survey of graduates has been administered to alumni for several years. The survey instrument has been revised to include questions about the objectives and about the quality of University Studies courses.

A review of the curriculum, including an analysis of the treatment of the objectives within each of the categories, has
been completed. Recommendations were made concerning the treatment of the objectives. In some instances, new courses or revised courses were recommended.

The institution has implemented a writing examination, to be taken after the completion of 75 hours, as a graduation requirement. The Writing Across the Curriculum program includes a Writing Center, with tutorial help available for students. Surveys of students and faculty indicate that student writing skills have improved, that faculty are asking for more writing from students, and that student attitudes about writing have improved.

Several faculty members have undertaken "mini" assessment projects. One faculty member who teachers a freshman level geography course has developed teaching materials that directly address critical thinking skills. His students, along with students in equivalent economics classes where the materials are not used, have been given locally developed pre- and post- tests of critical thinking skills.

Additional assessment information has focused on the use of non-intrusive measures. For instance, data concerning library usage provides some perspective on student abilities to locate and gather information. In addition, the institution is involved in an AAC project that will allow examination of student course-taking patterns.

The problem of addressing the assessment of student achievement within some of the categories has not been fully solved. Currently, the idea of using student portfolios of work collected throughout the student's college career is being considered. The freshman seminar provides the opportunity to discuss the objects and portfolios of work that might document a student's progress within each of the objectives. Students could then be reminded of the importance of their portfolios in various University Studies courses. Finally, a sample of students in the senior seminar courses could be asked to produce samples of work representing particular objectives. Faculty groups would evaluate the quality of the work and the extent to which the student has accomplished the objective.

Summary and Conclusions

The difficulties normally associated with revising general education curricula were addressed at Southeast Missouri State University by effective strategies including the design of program objectives related to the institutional mission, strong administrative support, and involvement of the entire university community. The University Studies Program is currently in the fourth year of implementation and consists of slightly over one hundred courses, all designed to provide students with opportunities to develop expertise in the nine program objectives. Activities addressing program objectives have been developed in selected areas of the Division of Student Affairs. The feedback provided by the use of multiple assessment measures of student achievement within the program is essential to making improvements and to keeping the program dynamic.

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